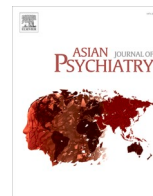




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Letter to the Editor

**Suicide among children during Covid-19 pandemic: An alarming social issue**

To the Editor,

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused havoc in the lives of the people. The fear and insecurity it has brought in its wake is not restricted to the increasing number of active reported cases and deaths, but also to the looming economic crisis and recession. Adding to this are the new realities of working from home, temporary unemployment, and home schooling of children. The pandemic has forced people out of their comfort zones and impacted their emotional and mental health (Barkur et al., 2020; Tandon, 2020). And while adults may be better equipped to handle the disruptions, children have been greatly impacted (Marsden et al., 2020).

This is best illustrated by the Indian state of Kerala, which had initially won worldwide appreciation for the way it had handled the COVID situation (World Health Organization, 2020). However, as the virus continued to spread its tentacles, Kerala's success with the pandemic was short-lived. And what came to the fore was even more alarming – that of children taking their lives. According to the official record, a total of 66 people committed suicide during the lockdown, including children (The Times of India, 2020). And in these cases, reasons were seen to be seemingly minor, for instance normal disciplining by parents for bunking online classes or playing mobile games (Thakur and Jain, 2020).

While children attend online classes, they spend the rest of their time in front of the TV and the Internet, and this in turn, has led to psychosocial problems like Internet addiction, lower self-esteem and low interest in physical activities (Marsden et al., 2020). Cyberbullying and anxiety while on social networking platforms, have also taken their toll on their mental health (McLoughlin et al., 2019).

The isolation caused by the lockdown has also resulted in children being overly sensitive to minor domestic issues (Li et al., 2020). It has also come to light that children whose parents are either affected, rendering their services in hospitals, or quarantined due to exposure to the virus are particularly vulnerable.

The Kerala state government has taken a series of steps to tackle this issue. Ever since June 25, 2020 and before the announcement of the SSLC exam results for class 10 and 12 students, several multi-level initiatives have been taken to provide mental support to children to help them deal with anxiety and other insecurities. The scope of these initiatives has now been extended to cover all school-going children.

Government school counsellors, who are already part of the psychosocial support network and trained to identify mental health concerns, form part of the support group at one level. The other support level is the health workers who have been provided a detailed checklist to monitor and report emotional issues among the children (Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, 2020).

In the light of the above, there is need for the government to undertake a comprehensive study in partnership with healthcare

professionals to identify issues that restrict children's ability to honestly and without fear communicate their emotional concerns to their families or councillors. There is also need for parents to play a more proactive role in their children's well-being.

Children learn from example. If they see their loved ones in stress, they are likely to absorb the vibes and exhibit similar behaviour. While the adults may be better equipped to deal with stress, children are more likely to break under pressure. Compared to this, when they see their parents handle a situation maturely and in a positive frame of mind, they will be more secure and confident. Keeping children away from reality cannot buffer them from ground realities. Rather, it is better they learn to take the bull by the horns - the more they are encouraged to face difficulties head on, the more resilient they are likely to become.

Parents and guardians should provide an environment of trust that encourages their wards to share with them their deepest fears and insecurities. If they find their children are emotionally withdrawn or depressed, they should immediately seek psychiatric help and spend more time with them (Lite, 2013).

The current pandemic has brought to shore a problem that needs redressal and that is, parents have to forgo the authoritative approach and be more receptive to their children. They should be able to read the signs and nip the problem in the bud. Also, in case they feel that they are unable to address their children's psychological needs, they shouldn't see it as a setback on their abilities, rather, they should immediately seek professional help to avert disastrous consequences such as depression or suicides. A happy childhood lays the foundation of a bright and secure future. And as is the law of nature, this pandemic too shall pass – however, it is important to ensure that it does not leave indelible scars on the minds of the children, rather it equips them with resilience and skills that hold them in good stead in the long run.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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